

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Department of Medical Genetics

May 1, 1957

Hon. Richard L. Neuberger /
Senator Office Building
Washington 25, D.C.

Dear Senator Neuberger:

One of my colleagues has told me that you have introduced a Bill calling for the establishment of an additional unit of the National Institutes of Health to deal with the impact on the public health of the development of atomic energy. I have long felt that the Atomic Energy Commission was dominated by engineering and physical-science orientations that with even the best of good will might still be unable to give adequate leadership for the protection of the public health. The climate this year is noticeably improved, but the confusion of past years over U.S. policy on the potential hazards of the testing programs, which came to a head with the appointment of the committees of the National Academy of Sciences, has left much to be desired.

While your Bill may not contain any direct reference to the existing health programs of the AEC, it is bound to be construed in that light. The greatest danger is that your proposal either in appearance or in fact should hinder the primary missions of the AEC. We both feel that the accomplishment of these missions is compatible with due caution for hygiene, but the allocation of responsibilities in such a vital and delicate field should be studied with unusual circumspection. Your Bill, if supported, ought at least to bring the issue to a proper focus.

A proposal of this sort was in the back of my mind in the writing of the enclosed editorial. However, in some ways the issues are too large for casual discussion. I feel the federal government should take more of an interest than it has in 'environmental' health hazards, both chemical and physical, but when we think of genetic effects as part of hygiene, as we should, we may be breaching a most perilous area, i.e. eugenic hygiene. To be quite rational, one can argue that similar objectives of reducing the incidence of defective-mutant births might be achieved by drastic social control of reproduction, but I shudder to think of the means that are needed for this end, and the cure here is surely worse than the disease. This does show that it might be necessary to compromise some genetic hazards from other causes, for example for our national security, provided we know just what the calculated risks were.

I would be grateful to you for a copy of your Bill, and for word of its present status in the legislative mill. It is also a bit late, but I have to congratulate you on the splendid campaign that won your election, and to wish you the best of success.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Medical Genetics

Neuberger, R.L.